

“Cup of Excellence” Awards Boost Sales and Prices of Specialty Coffees on the Internet

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—After coffee prices collapsed to the lowest level in 30 years and put more than 600,000 people out of work in Central America, USAID was there, helping to increase sales of high-quality and specialty coffees.

Coffee prices have plunged due to the recent oversupply on the world market when

producers in Southeast Asia began exporting significant quantities of coffee.

Central American growers are also coping with the aftermath of civil wars, hurricanes, low production levels, and aging plant stock.

USAID has cosponsored coffee competitions, endorsed by the Specialty Coffee Association of America, to spotlight high-

quality coffee grown in rich volcanic soils at high altitudes in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras.

The “Cup of Excellence” competitions, started by the U.S.-based Alliance for Coffee Excellence, Inc., pit the best coffees in a country against each other. National coffee judges—“cuppers”—select 50 coffee varieties from the samples entered by producers, cooperatives, and millers. Then a panel of distinguished international cuppers tests for bitterness, mouth quality, and aftertaste.

Coffees that receive the Cup of Excellence seal are auctioned via the internet to international buyers, sometimes for record-breaking prices. Proceeds go directly to producers and cooperatives, providing much needed revenues for farm equipment and supplies.

The participation of international cuppers attracts attention on the global market. A judge from Japan who cupped at the Nicaraguan competition remarked, “It was a pleasure and amazing to cup your wonderful coffee.... You should achieve great success at the internet auction.”

The international exposure helps small cooperatives and growers with excellent-quality coffee the most because they often are unable to market internationally.

One such cooperative at the Salvadoran Cup of Excellence was the coop ATAISI, which has 430 members, 40 of them women.

ATAISI has a health clinic that provides free services to members’ families, a school system including a high school, a housing project (currently on hold due to low coffee prices), and a natural area for ecotourism.

“We always knew we had a good cup of coffee, but we just did not have the means to verify its quality,” said coop president Osmín Aguilar. “The Cup of Excellence has confirmed what we always believed.”

During competitions in Nicaragua in 2002–03, many winners—including the first-place winner—were coffees of small, USAID-assisted producers. Of 37 coffees awarded the Cup of Excellence seal, 22 of their producers had benefited from USAID assistance.

The first-place winner in Nicaragua sold his raw coffee beans for \$7.05 per pound, well above the rates for average or even specialty coffees. Last year’s winner, a small farmer assisted by USAID, received a record-breaking price of \$11.75 per pound. ★

www.cupofexcellence.org

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A panel of international judges determine the coffees that will win “Cup of Excellence” awards. In the 2002–03 competition in Nicaragua, many winners—including the first-place winner—were the specialty coffees of small, USAID-assisted producers.